

# Journal of Rural Social Sciences

---

Volume 25  
Issue 2 *Volume 25, Issue 2*

Article 4

---

8-31-2010

## The Land Question and Ethnicity in the Darjeeling Hills

Swatahsiddha Sarkar  
*University of North Bengal*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jrss>



Part of the [Rural Sociology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Sarkar, Swatahsiddha. 2010. "The Land Question and Ethnicity in the Darjeeling Hills." *Journal of Rural Social Sciences*, 25(2): Article 4. Available At: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jrss/vol25/iss2/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for Population Studies at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Rural Social Sciences by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact [egrove@olemiss.edu](mailto:egrove@olemiss.edu).

## THE LAND QUESTION AND ETHNICITY IN THE DARJEELING HILLS

SWATAHSIDDHA SARKAR

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH BENGAL

### ABSTRACT

Although economic factors are often considered as essential for augmenting ethnic movements, the analytic relationship between economic issues and ethnicity is far from being clear cut. In an attempt to address the problem of ethnicity in a non-Marxist theoretical plane, most of the studies on ethnic problems inadvertently indulge such logical inconsistencies. Such a critical reading led us to conceptualize ethnicity as a lived-in category – much like the concepts of class or caste – where both the material and cultural domain of routine life congregates. With the help of a case study of the Gorkhaland movement in the Darjeeling Hills (India) and the input of a particular field of material predisposition – namely, the issues related with land and agrarian social formation, this paper attempts to argue that ethnic movements are a dynamic podium wherein the encoded meanings of material and/or economic issues/grievances are decoded in cultural idioms.

Even if the discussions on ethnicity have an inbuilt tendency to develop a theoretical plane that criticizes Marxian class analysis and demands an autonomous conceptual frame duly encouraged by post-Marxist and post-structuralist/postmodernist theoretical renditions, literatures on ethnicity for the most part have stressed economic factors, in some way or the other. Hence, finding available studies, which have made considerable advances in understanding the problem of Gorkha ethnicity, that have concentrated their focus on economic factors as the root cause of ethnic antagonism and conflict in the Darjeeling Hills (West Bengal, India) is common. ‘Economic stagnation’ (Dasgupta 1988), ‘uneven implementation of development policies’ (Chakrabarty 1988), ‘economic deprivation and negligence’ (Bura Magar 1994; Lama 1988; McHenry Jr. 2007; Nanda 1987), ‘petty-bourgeoisie aggrandisements against the dominance of monopoly capitalists of the Centre and the State’ (Sarkar 1988), ‘economic negligence, exploitation, and unavailability of white-collar jobs’ (Chadha 2005), ‘growing unemployment and step motherly attitude of the state regarding the overall development of the hill areas’ (Timsina 1992), ‘uneven development’ (Dasgupta 1999; Datta 1991), ‘endemic poverty, underdevelopment, and the perception of being “malgoverned”’ (Ganguly 2005), are some such factors many scholars put as the root cause of the Gorkhaland movement in the Darjeeling Hills. However, none of these studies have made it abundantly clear how economic conditions – the domain of the material – are linked to the desires of ethnic separatism, which conceptually remained under the rubric of culture – the non-material. Again, if the economic factors remarkably remained so significant, as the studies show, then why ultimately the cultural warpath (i.e.,

ethnic conflict) and not an economic one (i.e., class conflict) appeared as a suitable remedial strategy? One obvious question arises thus: how the 'material' is transposed into 'cultural'? The present paper is an attempt to answer such questions by analyzing the case of the Gorkha ethnicity and movement as it emerged out of the people's grievances experienced through their quotidian life processes cloaked in their relative positions within the structural inequality.

In fact, ethnic identity much like the issues of class or caste is a lived-in category that emerges out of the perception of reality and receives constant reformulation, since the reality is itself dynamic. In our treatment ethnic identification – much like all other identifications – is overall rooted in the larger canvas of social experience, which determines the processes of framing contending relationships between and among groups based on their varying capacity of possessing the valued and scarce resources available in the society. Instead of pinpointing the causes of the movement, our analysis attempts to show that the assertion of Gorkha ethnic identity has had payoffs with respect to resource access and utilization and that the protracted struggle of the Gorkhas for separate statehood is that trajectory wherein both the cultural and material aspects of routine life coalesce. Sometimes this happens even without an immediate ethnic 'other'. This is particularly the case, as the study shows, with the hill agrarian sector.

It thus becomes imperative that the problem should be studied in a historical plane putting utmost emphasis on the social formation of the Darjeeling Hills, which would help us focus the pattern of resource distribution on an ethnic plane vis-à-vis the question of structural inequality. The importance of treating the issue of Gorkhaland movement as a historical phenomenon can hardly be ignored, especially when one finds that the Darjeeling Hills has experienced a century long historicity of protest – sometimes accommodative, sometimes violent – to achieve a separate politico-administrative arrangement for self rule. Moreover, the historical perspective is needed to show the fundamental changes that have taken place within the social formation of the region since the colonial days and had corresponding effects for furthering the cause of the movement in the post-colonial period. Therefore, a proper historical analysis of ethnicity can help us understand how the grievances of the masses were articulated and were translated into the courses of violent action, how new equations came up because of state intervention and how the overall dynamics of the movement kept on rolling, putting ethnicity at the center stage.

## SOCIAL FORMATION AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Indeed, there can never be a single cause of an ethnic movement that stretched over a century.<sup>1</sup> However, our concern regarding the causes of Gorkhaland movement is not about degree but of kind, by which we mean that Gorkha ethnicity, or for that matter the Gorkhaland movement, is embedded in the social formation of the Darjeeling Hills. It is neither entirely the product of primordial sentiments nor even the result of elite manipulation, but had been the outcome of a dynamic social formation that reproduced its productive forces, relations of production, as well as the relations of subjugation and exploitation meted out by its incumbents.

The onus of social formation in augmenting the cause of social movement has been stressed by most of the major theoretical paradigms in some form or the other. For example, functionalism, though lately emerging from its erstwhile position of bracketing social movements as pathological social behavior, became increasingly concerned with the analysis of social movement as a variety of (normal) collective action and showed the necessity of framing a general hypothesis on the social system while analyzing social movements as a collective phenomenon of some sort. Likewise, symbolic interactionism and resource mobilization theory, in their attempts to analyze social movement, put stress on the relational structures and on the complex processes of interaction mediated by certain networks of belonging, respectively. The Marxist tradition, perhaps, has given utmost emphasis on the necessity to view social movements in relation to structural arrangements available in the social formation. Each social formation is rooted in a particular structure of relationship and movement is not the cause but the outcome of the differentially arranged social order in which privileges and rewards are more in possession of some minority groups compared with the majority others. Even the post-Marxist or for that matter the New Social Movement (NSM) perspective in their zeal to study the identity-based movements as manifestations of post-material claims hardly denied the importance of social formation while understanding the so-called post-material claims of the NSMs. In outlining the principles for the analysis of collective action, Melucci (1996:24) – a prominent figure of NSM school – points out that the analytical field of the NSMs depends on the systems of relationships within which such action takes place and toward which it is directed.

---

<sup>1</sup>The recorded history of the Gorkhaland movement suggests that the first spurt of the movement can be marked out in the year 1907 when the hill people submitted a memorandum – for the first time – to the colonial government urging separation from the then Bengal and the need to formulate a separate administrative arrangement for the Darjeeling Hills.

## ALTHUSSER, SOCIAL FORMATION, AND THE DYNAMICS OF RURAL DARJEELING

Taking a cue from the centrality of social formation in the study of social movement as analyzed above, an attempt has been made to focus on the social formation of the Darjeeling Hills<sup>2</sup> and its contribution to the development of a protracted ethnic movement in the region. Our treatment of the concept of social formation is Althusserian in inspiration and is viewed as a complex whole composed of concrete economic, political and ideological relations that provide the pretext upon which the consolidation of selfhood of the individual or the group within a given social space becomes feasible. It is worth mentioning here instead of using such terms like 'social system', 'social order' or for that matter 'society,' Althusser (1997) preferred the use of 'social formation'. Since he believed while terms like 'social system' and 'social order' presupposes a structure that reduces the form of all its emanations, 'society' as a concept is loaded with pre-Marxist humanist conception that treats social life as ultimately the product of individual human beings.

Althusser has used the concept of social formation with some broader theoretical appeal. He problematized the so-called base-superstructure module by bringing together the notions of social system, order, and society closer to his post-Marxist formulation of social formation. Social formation, for Althusser, is constituted of a complex of concrete economic, political, and ideological relations, bound together and given their particular character as capitalist, feudal or whatever by the fact that economic relations, is the 'determinant in the last instance.' Conceived in this manner the concept of social formation presupposes that under this model social reality is neither determined, nor to be explained by a single causal variable but always by the whole structure (a notion that he labels as 'overdetermination'), which remains amenable to the economic determinant only in the last instance.

The uniqueness in Althusser's concept of social formation lies in the fact that it problematizes the 'base-superstructure' relationship (that remains central, almost invariably, to the whole realm of post-Marxist scholarship) to that extreme of

---

<sup>2</sup> Darjeeling has been one of the prominent hill stations developed by the British in colonial India. The term Darjeeling Hills, used in the present text, denotes the three hill subdivisions namely Darjeeling Sadar, Kurseong, and Kalimpong, unless otherwise mentioned. Kurseong and Kalimpong are also hill stations but are lesser known than Darjeeling. British preferred Darjeeling most perhaps due to its high altitude and favorable climatic conditions. It deserves mention that Darjeeling was started in 1835 and at present is a District of the State of West Bengal, India

## THE LAND QUESTION AND ETHNICITY IN THE DARJEELING HILLS 85

discarding the mono-causal analysis involved in its typical Marxist formulation and accepting simultaneously the autonomous existence of the superstructural elements (like political and ideological aspects, which however, happened to be the elementary component of his concept of social formation). There is every possibility that in place of economic instances the political or the ideological instances may become determinant and dominant in a mode of production; this happens particularly when the primary producers own the means of production and the surplus is extracted either through the state (the political) or through the religious institutions (the ideological). This is why Althusser (1997:202) has conceived of social formation as a structure articulated in dominance, and whether economic, political or ideological in instance, the enjoyment of that position of dominance is neither prefixed nor predetermined. It is at this moment he emphasizes the autonomous existence of the principal modes of dominance, which are highly complex and closely related to each other. In the Althusserian conception, each instance of the social formation moves through time having its own rhythm, unevenly developing relative to the other instances, with which it nevertheless is interrelated into an organic whole (Peet 1978:150). This also becomes vividly clear when he upholds that the economy is the determinant 'only in the last instance'. If economy is the determinant 'only in the last instance,' this obviously implies that becoming dominant at any other instance is possible for other structure(s), albeit for economic reasons. Althusser has gone to that extreme in claiming that: "From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the 'last instance' never comes" (1997:113).

Applying these meanings involved in the concept of social formation in establishing the link between the land question and ethnicity in the Darjeeling Hills, utmost care has been paid to pinpoint the dominant structures that remained operative in both cases of pre- and post-colonial agrarian social structure. Attempts have also been made to unmask how the cultural/ideological factors have shaped in many respects the social formation of the Darjeeling Hills, particularly during the colonial period. Again during the post-colonial phase the dominance of the political structure and processes and their complex linkages with the agrarian crisis have been taken into analytic consideration. The present essay is a preliminary attempt to show how in different historical epochs of history different structures (economic, political or ideological) have remained dominant in executing and maintaining the complex social whole that made up the agrarian social formation of the Darjeeling Hills.

Along with tea plantations, agriculture constitutes one of the major productive systems of the Darjeeling Hills, which helped maintain a sizeable section of the population's<sup>3</sup> livelihood. In fact, the real significance of agriculture in the Darjeeling Hills lies not merely in its capacity of being the life support system of most of the population, but for being a resilient subsystem grounded in historically circumscribed factors and forces that has affected the micro practices of everyday life of the hill people at large. Hence, any attempt to examine the causes of a century-long political movement in the region without having a reference to the agrarian history, or for that matter the evolution of agrarian social structure in the Darjeeling Hills, would surely be an incomplete one. Unlike the previous studies, an endeavor has been made here to trace out the 'genealogies of subjectification' within the domain of the changing structure of production relations, which underlie issues that have impinged upon the changing forms of politics and political processes of the region over the years, issues such as forms of landed property, forms of tenancy and revenue arrangements, forms and nature of labor, forms of appropriation of surplus from agricultural produce and the like. In the following sections the analysis will center on these issues and their arrangements as they occurred in the colonial and post-colonial agrarian social formation of the Darjeeling Hills.

#### EVOLUTION OF THE AGRARIAN SOCIAL STRUCTURE IN THE DARJEELING HILLS

Though the district of Darjeeling made a late entry into the colonial body-polity of Bengal, the colonial interests over the field of agriculture (i.e., to maximize the income of the government from the agricultural sector mainly in the forms of revenues) of both the Bengal and Darjeeling districts remained the same. However, the experience of the different administrative policy measures prescribed for the district throughout the colonial period had resulted in the maintenance of a unique approach, which exempted the Darjeeling district from the purview of the revenue administration of Bengal, at the one hand, and kept intact the sustainability of revenue returns appropriated from the agrarian sectors of the region, on the other. In place of the pan-Indian policy of expanded colonial appropriation in the agrarian sector maintained chiefly through the initiation of forceful production of commercial

---

<sup>3</sup> According to 2001 census data, almost one-third of the working population of the hill region of the District is represented by only such categories like cultivators and agricultural workers, among others.

## THE LAND QUESTION AND ETHNICITY IN THE DARJEELING HILLS 87

crops, the agrarian sector in the Darjeeling Hills had experienced the development of a small peasant subsistence economy that remained undisturbed for a very long time.

The social history of the area suggests that the district of Darjeeling was made up of those territories that earlier belonged to Sikkim (the entire geographical space of the two hill subdivisions Darjeeling Sadar and Kurseong and the Terai region) and Bhutan (the Kalimpong subdivision and parts of Dooars). Both the regions and their people had experienced different patterns of land ownership, production processes, taxation policy, etc. because of the historically circumscribed forces of a seemingly feudal social order upheld by the two independent countries of the Eastern Himalayas before colonization. A succinct review of the agrarian situations of these regions thus becomes obligatory to comprehend why and how the British had thought of a separate revenue administration and different tenancy measures for the Darjeeling Hills, which deviated largely from the rest of Bengal. That is to say in other words that agrarian social formation in the Darjeeling Hills has been conditioned in the main by historical factors and forces.

By the time the Sikkimese territory was incorporated into British India in 1835 and again in 1850, which covered almost the entire tract located westward to the river Tista, Sikkim had maintained several laws and regulations related with the management of its agrarian sector. Land ownership measures in the then Sikkim had allowed its subjects only the usufructory right over a piece of land and the ownership right was vested with the hereditary institution of the *Chogyal* (Raja of Sikkim) (Namgyal 1966:46). In the agrarian hierarchy of Sikkim the *Kajis* (the noblemen) are the real aristocrats who enjoyed a position of tremendous socioeconomic significance and historically played a much valued role in the body polity of Sikkim hereditarily, although they did not also possess the right to property over land. However, *Kajis* had often received pieces of land from the *Chogyal* as rewards for the service they had rendered to the state. The unlimited power of the *Kajis* had also capacitated them to compel the *raiya*ts (tenants) to engage in forced systems of labor like *Zharlangi* and *Kuruwa*<sup>4</sup>. It needs to be pointed out that the Lepchas, the autochthonous community of Sikkim and also supposedly

---

<sup>4</sup> Under the *Zharlangi* system, the *raiya*ts had to carry loads within the country for the tourists and officers without any payment. The incoming tourists and officers came into Gelkhola by train, where they were picked up by coolies. Coolies in groups would be waiting for the loads to come at different places like Gangtok, Singtam, Gelkhola, Melli and Rangpo. They – the *Kuruwas* as they were called – had to wait in such stations, with their own arrangement of food and clothes, for at least 15 days after which another batch of villagers would come and replace them (Subba 1986:2-3).



the first settler of that portion of land that ceded to the British in 1835, were not accustomed with settled agricultural practices. They practiced *jhum* (shifting) cultivation without any sophisticated method that resulted in a small amount of production that helped maintain their livelihood. This perhaps explains why the Sikkim Government in earlier days had not adopted a regularized system of revenue administration. It is interesting that the entire territory westward to the river Tista (covering an area of 138 sq. mile) at the time of cession during 1835 was entirely under forest and practically uninhabitable, although a reference of a few Lepchas – probably 100 souls in total – who came there perhaps due to their habit of *jhum* cultivation, can be located in early historical documents on the region (Dash 1947:49; Pearson 1839:16). Later, in 1850 when a larger area (covering an area of 640 sq. mile, which amounts to be the entire geographical space of the district, excepting the Kalimpong Subdivision) located westward to the river Tista came under the British the entire tract was also found no better than the earlier 138 sq. mile. Habitations were almost nonexistent as the agricultural potent of the region was yet to be realized.

It deserves mention here that the realization of the agricultural potentiality of the Darjeeling Hills had been solely an indigenous affair. Unlike the case of tea plantations, agriculture in the initial years had not received any special treatment either from the part of the colonial rulers or from the side of the European entrepreneurs who remained busy with setting up tea estates one after another. This is revealed in the very first attempt made by the government to formulate a set of rules for the grant of lands on 4<sup>th</sup> September, 1839. These rules made all the lands of prominent locations, which might have been otherwise suitable for agriculture, reserved either as building locations or as *bazaar* (market) spaces. Interestingly enough, the Rule of 1839 declared those lands as suitable for farming leases, which remained unsuitable either as building site or as *bazaar* locations. Provisions were also made under the same rule to lease out no less than 10 acres of land as farming leases for a term of 30 years. If the land were not cleared, it was also proposed that the land should be held rent free for the initial five years and for the remaining period the payable rate of rent was fixed at Rs. 2 (rupees) per acre. Despite these provisions, the Rule of 1839 failed to attract the native cultivators and during 1839 – 50, not one plot was leased out. Dr. Campbell also pointed out in a report of 1850 that up to 1849 he had not found it practical to appropriate any revenue from the aboriginal inhabitants of the old Darjeeling Territory (O'Malley 1999:150-1). Since 1850 he had attempted to settle the native cultivators as lease holders and become successful only marginally in this regard, although much of the

## THE LAND QUESTION AND ETHNICITY IN THE DARJEELING HILLS 89

land by that time was brought under tea plantation. However, neither the agricultural potentiality of this entire tract located westward to the river Tista was fully realized nor was the revenue administration for the agrarian sector of this part of the district formalized until the incorporation of Kalimpong Region, a fertile land in the eastern side of the river Tista, in the District. Terai Region. On the other hand, from the time of annexation in 1850, the areas located below Pankhabari and ranging from Naxalbari to Siliguri, including Phansidewa, had experienced formal land revenue administrative measures.

The Kalimpong area located eastward to the river Tista was annexed under the Sinchula Treaty with Bhutan concluded in November 11, 1865. It needs to be remembered that the tract located eastward of the river Tista, which earlier was also known as Dalingkot, had contained a sizable amount of population who had practiced cultivation and fell under the administration of the Bhutanese Government before its occupation by the British. During its annexation the Kalimpong tract was populated entirely by the Bhutias, numbered 3,530 souls in total<sup>5</sup>, who paid a poll tax in lieu of land revenue. The amount of this tax in 1865 was Rs. 640 (£64), which sum was collected by nineteen *mandals* (village headmen), who seem to have held a similar position under the Bhutan Government (Hunter 1974:121). The area covering the whole tract lying eastward to the river Tista under the district was composed of 401 sq. miles, which was subdivided into a Government Estate covering 178 sq. miles, tea estates covering only 10 sq. miles, and a forest area covering a larger area of 213 sq. miles. The Government Estate during the last settlement (1901-1903) was subdivided into 48 blocks each under the charge of a *mandal*. However, Kalimpong town, which also formed a separate block, fell under the Government Estate of 178 sq. mile but was not given under the charge of any *mandal* and was managed directly by the Khasmahal Office (Bell 1905:1).

The allocation of land lying within the Kalimpong tract clearly indicates that the colonial rulers had put less emphasis, unlike the territories lied west to the river Tista, on the cultivation of tea and encouraged the development of cultivation within the tract. Perhaps, two major considerations might have led the colonial rulers to adopt such a policy that favored the cultivation and not tea plantations in the region located eastward to Tista. The first consideration might be the result of

---

<sup>5</sup>This estimation is available in O'Malleys Gazetteer (O'Malley 1999:36) although T.B. Subba has mentioned, without citing the source, that the number of the persons settled there in Kalimpong during annexation was 3536 (Subba 1985:2).

late entry of the Kalimpong region into British territory. That is to say, by the time Kalimpong was annexed in 1865, tea plantations on the other side of the river Tista had exposed fully the business potential, if not it reached its optimal level of growth. This perhaps made the tea planters less interested to promote the industry any further. Apart from this reason, the poor communication system was another factor that discouraged the further deployment of colonial capital in the Kalimpong tract for plantation. The natural barrier between Kalimpong and the rest of the district was provided by the river Tista itself. Except for a few suspension bridges, there were no other arrangements available until 1933 when the first concrete bridge, known as Anderson Bridge, was constructed (that replaced the earlier suspension bridge known as the Tista bridge), which linked Kalimpong with the mainland of the district and also with the outside world.

The point is that, much like the historical factor the ecological factor was no less significant in determining the differential patterns of land use, productive organization and the overall agrarian structure of the hills. All these explain why agriculture instead of tea plantations has remained the economic mainstay of the region located eastward to the river Tista in the district. Hence, the analysis of hill agrarian social formation would take into account the evolution of agrarian social structure in the Kalimpong tract, along with the other areas in the eastern part of the river Tista.

During the two decades after the first settlement – effected in 1882 – the population of Kalimpong tract almost trebled from 12,683 in 1881 to 26,631 in 1891 and 36,164 in 1901. The rapid increase of population within this tract decreased the average size of per-capita holdings. During the 1892 Settlement the average holding size was 13 acres, but at the time of third settlement (1901-1903) the average size of holding per-*raiayat* was 9.70 acres (Bell 1905:7, 9). These changes indicate not merely a shift in the ‘material density’ (*a la* Durkheim) but also in its corresponding effect upon the ‘moral density’ of the concerned society. By moral density we mean the changes that took place within the realm of relationships between different communities in respect to the process of cultivation on the one hand and in relation to the availability of ecological resources<sup>6</sup> on the other.

---

<sup>6</sup>The experience of a rapid increase of population of this tract clearly suggests that the reclamation of waste lands and of forest areas would have been the possible ways to absorb the growing population. By the time of the completion of the Third Settlement (1901-1903) there appeared an acute deficiency of grazing land since most of such areas had already been occupied by the new settlers. The problem was so alarming that it led C. A. Bell, the Chief Settlement Officer in-charge of the Third Settlement, to comment that the need for reserving village grazing grounds (owing to

## THE LAND QUESTION AND ETHNICITY IN THE DARJEELING HILLS 91

Subsequently, the questions of *rayotari* (tenancy) rights, land alienation, and relations of subinfeudation cropped up for the first time in the hill agrarian scenario. The colonial rulers did not lose sight of these propensities and they chalked out the revenue administrative measures accordingly, but failed to control the emerging social processes on all counts.

## THE LAND TENURE ARRANGEMENT AND THE EMERGING HILL AGRARIAN SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Instead of adopting policies at par with the then Bengal revenue administration, the colonial rulers had paid appropriate attention toward the local factors and forces of significance. The whole issue of revenue administration for the Darjeeling District was based on the premise of 'agrarian peace,' which, it was hoped, in turn would stabilize the revenue returns and rule out the possibility of any disgruntlement against the alien rulers who controlled not only the agrarian sector but also the entire political economy of the Darjeeling Hills. The consideration of agrarian peace might have led the colonial rulers to not initiate any fundamental agrarian restructuring measure toward the existing 'traditional farm management' system to suit the economic interests of the 'master race'. This explains why the British had straightway accepted the *mandal* system that prevailed in Bhutan or why the poll-tax arrangement, instead of revenue or rent, had been maintained for a very long time until the last settlement was affected in Kalimpong. Besides, in the later phase, the colonial rulers had also endorsed the local categories as the accepted forms of the *rayotari* arrangement. Furthermore, the foresightedness of the colonial rulers led them to arrange for the local religious organizations too. The British Government provided liberal land grants to the lamas and monasteries on the pretext of their readings regarding the local history of the region<sup>7</sup> that made them

---

the great increase of cultivation and cattle since 1882) in the Kalimpong tract is now much more insisted than it was before (Bell 1905:11).

<sup>7</sup> The competent British officials made the Colonial Government aware about the fact that Darjeeling and Kalimpong tract before their annexation by the British remained under the direct supervision of the Buddhist monasteries. This is clearly upheld in a note prepared by Mr. Edgar who instructed Mr. Ritchie, when the latter was deputed to make the preliminary settlement enquiries for Kalimpong during 1878, in the following words: "In making proposals for any settlement, the position and claims of the Lamas of Monasteries – Kalimpong, Phydong, and Chumilam – should be considered. These people now hold their lands without paying capitation tax and it is a question whether their exemption should not be continued when the lands are settled. In deciding this question, I think the feelings of the people as well as customs of Bhutan government should have

believe that the lamas had great personal influence in the locality and may play a very significant role in settling the disputes, if any, among the natives.

Before detailing the land tenure arrangements it is necessary to have an idea regarding the population character of the tract without which the dynamics of agrarian relationship in the Darjeeling Hills could hardly be comprehended completely. As said earlier, the tract lying east of the river Tista soon after its cession had upheld agriculture and not tea plantation as the economic basis of the region, which attracted the hill cultivators rather than the educated Bengali middle class people. Hence, another course of hill migration started in which fresh batches of Nepali cultivators began coming up from the deteriorating agrarian state of affairs of Eastern Nepal to the virgin lands of Kalimpong. The incoming of the Nepalis in greater numbers than any other community is an event of historical significance since they trained the autochthonous communities of the hills in the art of settled cultivation. It is needless to mention that for the British the economic potentiality of Kalimpong lay in cultivation and not in tea plantation and for making cultivation economically meaningful they needed settled cultivators. The expertise of Nepalis as settled cultivators had become well known throughout the Eastern Himalayas. Quite expectedly, the colonial government had favored the 'colonisation of the tract by the Nepalis' even in full knowledge that their increasing presence might encroach upon the interests of the indigenous population of the region represented by the Lepchas and the Bhutias<sup>8</sup>.

In later decades however, some arrangements were made to safeguard the interests of the autochthones but not at the cost of the Nepalis. Along with the Nepalis some plainsmen, mainly the Marwaris (who were locally known as *Kanyas* or sometimes as *Kayas*) and Beharis, had also arrived who mainly served as money lenders or as petty-businessmen. The role of the Marwaris as money lenders

---

great weight allowed them" (Edgar's Letter dated 21<sup>st</sup> November, 1878). The government accordingly recognized the lama's claims and in laying down the main lines of settlement, ordered that each gumpa should have assigned to it a grant of land, proportioned to size, rent free and in no way subordinate to the *mandal* within whose local limits it might fall. It was also suggested that the lamas in return would be bound to arrange for the maintenance of a school and to perform all religious and monastic duties required. All these explain why and how the lama's right to hold land was recognized by the British from the very beginning.

<sup>8</sup>To no one's surprise Hunter, even before the first settlement of Kalimpong (1882), had pointed out in his Account such propensities of inter-ethnic conflict between the Nepalis and the Lepcha - Bhutia communities in respect of the question of land occupation. However, he ultimately favored such possessions of land made by the Nepalis as healthy for the colonial government (Hunter 1974:122).

## THE LAND QUESTION AND ETHNICITY IN THE DARJEELING HILLS 93

provided them the opportunity to share a position in the agrarian social structure of the Darjeeling Hills, and in some exceptional cases they also become able to hold lands, mainly by engaging in matrimonial bonds with hill ladies (Bell 1905:13). However, except in the Terai<sup>9</sup>, the Marwaris had never enjoyed the status of being a *jotedar* (land lord) throughout the hills. Conspicuously enough Bell's (1905) Survey and Settlement Report has no mention regarding the Bengalis. The Bengali middle class people came much later to Kalimpong, perhaps with the initiation of white-collar job opportunities in the town. Still, today the presence of the Bengalis in the predominantly agrarian belts of the Darjeeling Hills is abysmally low, if not nil. The point is that the Bengalis as a community neither had their strong presence in the agrarian social structure of the hills nor did there exist any possibility (for the agrarian sector) – unlike the tea plantations – which would have given birth to an anti-Bengali psyche among the hill people.

The historical evolution of agrarian relations in the Darjeeling Hills and its distinctiveness was upheld by the provision that the government remained the sole proprietor of all estates within the tract and there existed practically none between the government and the *raiyat*, the actual tiller of the soil. The Bengal Tenancy Act had also not been promulgated here. Hence the questions of *Zamindars* or for that matter the *Zamindari* system did not arise in the hills. The *raiyats* since the first settlement were not permitted to sublet their lands, which they received for ten years lease based on payment of rent. Only local hill-men such as Lepchas, Bhutias, and Nepalis were eligible to become *raiyats*. Above the *raiyats* existed another category of people who were called as *mandals* and were entrusted with the responsibility to collect the rent from the *raiyats*, according to the rent rolls and remit them to the manager, who remained responsible to the deputy commissioner. Apart from this, the *mandals* also had the responsibility to arrange for the free labor needed for the construction of roads and they played the role of the intermediary between the government and the *raiyats*. Besides all these duties they were also entrusted with such responsibilities (like protection of the forest and grazing lands, preservation of agrarian peace and public order etc.) which led them to enjoy the position of an informal leader or the headman of the community.

Four provisions were made as measures to remunerate the *mandals*: i) a commission of 10 percent on the rents he collected (except cardamom for which he received nothing), ii) any rent that they could realize during the currency of

---

<sup>9</sup> See Mitra's Settlement Report for a detailed account on the issue that clearly shows the emergence of the Marwaris as Jotedars in the Terai Khas Mahals of the district of Darjeeling (Mitra 1927:14).

settlement from new *raiya*s settled by them on *khas* lands (at the expiry of the settlement such lands were settled by the government direct with the tenants), iii) permission to hold the whole of their land rent free, and iv) a free permit for the grazing of their own private cattle in the Government reserved forests (Bell 1902)<sup>10</sup>. Although the *mandals* in other parts of the district had rendered similar services, they had received dissimilar privileges. In the West Tista Khas Mahals and in Sadar Hills Khas Mahals the *mandals* received neither the rent-free grant nor the free grazing lands. As far as the community background of the *mandals* is concerned, they invariably belonged to the Nepali community. Although occasionally some Lepchas or Bhutias rose to the status of being the *mandals* but the British, overall, preferred the Nepalis as best suited for the said position, perhaps due to their industrious character, at the one hand and their ability to speak *Khaskura* on the other<sup>11</sup>.

Both in their income and power in the local society, the *mandals* had historically enjoyed a superior position in the agrarian social structure in the hills. Between the decades 1880-1900 (i.e., the period ranging between the enactment of First to Third Settlement) the *mandals* had exerted a tremendous amount of power and coercion upon the *raiya*s, overall, and the new coming settlers, in particular, through their capacity to settle the new *raiya*s and to realize the rent whatsoever being charged against such new settlements (although this provision was dropped in the Third Settlement). The point is that before the 1903 the *mandals* had remained the sole arbiters on the issues like who would settle where, and most important, how much these new settlers would pay. It could be well-surmised what these issues would

---

<sup>10</sup> However, since the Third settlement (1901-1903) the remuneration of the *mandals* was cut down to size accordingly. In the third Settlement Report of Kalimpong it is pointed out that the *mandals* would now onwards receive: i) 10 percent on his collection of rents (except cardamom rents) and ii) a rent-free grant. As regards new lands they will no longer receive, as formerly, the whole rents from these. Instead of a free grazing permit the number of head of the cattle (cows and bullocks, buffaloes, sheep, goats, etc.) to be introduced for grazing purposes was fixed to 20 (the number of the cattle would be decided by the following proportion: one buffalo was considered equivalent to two cows, bullocks, or ponies; and one cow to two sheep, goats, or pigs) (Bell 1905:13-14).

<sup>11</sup> This is revealed in Bell's Settlement Report that maintains: "As a general rule Nepalese are more efficient as *mandals* than are Lepchas or Bhutias. In future a man should not be appointed as a *mandal* unless he can read and write Lepcha, Bhutia, or *Khaskura*. And if possible, one should be obtained (only from among the Nepalis) who can read and write *Khaskura*, since this is now the common language of the people. But the Bhutias and Lepchas should as far as possible be appointed as *mandals* in succession to Bhutias and Lepchas respectively" (Bell 1905:14, parentheses added)

## THE LAND QUESTION AND ETHNICITY IN THE DARJEELING HILLS 95

have meant to the many people who came there in search of livelihood. The possession of large amounts of land and the power of supervision of the entire agrarian belt enabled the *mandals* to maintain a process of subinfeudation – disregarding the provisions of law – in which the illiterate and ignorant cultivators always remained under their absolute control, as the *mandals* sometimes offered new leases from their land storage thereby defying the provisions of the *patta*, which they received from the government. Apart from the anomalies in management, the *mandals* were often criticized in all the four settlement reports for non-reporting of the actual amount of land the *raiyats* held, the number of the *raiyats* and accordingly, the rent they generated.

All these actions again show that there remained always a gap between what they had showed to the government as collection of rents and what they actually had realized from the *raiyats*. The *mandals* also kept many under-*raiyats* and collected rent from them, which happened to be much higher than the government rent. The point is that according to the provisions of the *patta*, the *raiyats* had no power to sublet their lands to anybody and the position of the *mandals*, though they have been entrusted with different roles, responsibilities and remuneration too by the government in the revenue administration of the hills, stood no better than a *raiyat*. Thus theoretically, they could not show how much land they possessed (which was tilled by somebody else as subtenant, who remained under the total mercy of the *mandals*) by any other's name (as *raiyat*) since it would be considered as illegal. Practically, they paid only a minimum amount of rent and collected a huge amount from the under-*raiyats* who tilled those lands, most of which the *mandals* had received as free-land (as parts of their remuneration).

However, there remained no legal provision that could have restricted such processes of infeudation or illegal subletting of land to the under-*raiyats*. Such processes ultimately brought two consequences. First, there appeared sharp polarization within the agrarian hierarchy situating the small groups of the *mandals* at the top, who single-handedly accumulated considerable amount of wealth (through subletting lands indiscriminately and misrepresenting the actual amount of rent collected therefrom), power and land, and the sizeable section of the *raiyats* and under-*raiyats* at the bottom, who remained totally under the control of the *mandals*. Second, there appeared a process of growing pauperization of the rural mass because of the alienation of lands<sup>12</sup>, particularly from the Lepchas and Bhutias

---

<sup>12</sup>The propensity of land alienation in the Darjeeling Hills and the casualties brought by such a process mainly for the Lepchas and (to a lesser extent) the Bhutias was perhaps noticed by the



to those of the Nepalis and the decreasing size of the holdings (caused by the incoming of the large number of the Nepalis from the adjacent areas). Backed by their relatively well-off economic position, the *mandals* had turned their attention toward the other secular domains of life. This perhaps explains why *mandals* in spite of being illiterate sent their wards to schools, colleges, and other vocational courses.<sup>13</sup> Apart from showing a newer cultural outlook, the progenies of the *mandals* had taken active interest in the socio-political processes of the region. Thus, it is no wonder to see the co-relation between landownership and political power even in the hills. It is pertinent to note in this context that the family of a *mandal* of Bhalukop (Kalimpong), namely Dhanabir Gurung, popularly known as *Bheriwala Mandal*, had produced many well-educated political leaders like Dambar Singh Gurung, Ari Bahadur Gurung, Nar Bahadur Gurung, and Gajendra Gurung, among others. What is worth noting is the fact that the basis of elite formation in Kalimpong was rooted in the agrarian context, overall, and in the *mandal* family background, in particular. All these suggest that the questions of political power and leadership in Kalimpong had mingled with the domain of agrarian social structure, which in fact, has added a new dimension in the overall leadership structure of the hills that maintained an archetypical urban middle class orientation over the years.

---

Deputy Commissioner (Mr. Earle) in 1898 when he asked the Manager (Rajah Tendook Pulzar) of the Kalimpong Government Estate to furnish a report regarding whether the Lepchas of Kalimpong were dying out due to their incapability to withstand the Paharia (i.e., the Nepalis) competition for land. The report was (prepared by Sri S.C. Bose) sent to the Deputy Commissioner on 20th June 1898, which in clear terms upheld that such alienation is a common phenomenon in Kalimpong in which only the well-to-do Lepchas had persevered against the aggressive Paharias (Deputy Commissioner had forwarded the copy of a letter written to him by Mr. C. U. Bolt dated 16th June, 1898 in which such apprehensions were made. The Memorandum sent by the Deputy Commissioner, bearing No. 465G, Dated 17th June, 1898, the letter of the Manager, Kalimpong Government Estate forwarding the report on the issue prepared by Sri, S. C. Bose, all were collected from the Record Room of District Magistrate's Office, Darjeeling during field work). In 1876, however, Hunter in his account also had provided such trepidations of inter-community conflicts among the Lepchas, and Bhutias against the Nepalis and suggested for a careful attention before a settlement is effected (Hunter 1974: 122). Moreover, both Bell (1905: 15) and Philpot's (1925: 8) Settlement Report have made it clear that the Lepchas had been losing their lands to the more thrifty Nepali communities since the days of First Settlement (that took place in 1882).

<sup>13</sup> Bell's settlement report also pointed out this short of a change in the cultural outlook of the *mandals* (Bell 1905:30).

## THE LAND QUESTION AND ETHNICITY IN THE DARJEELING HILLS 97

## AGRARIAN SOCIAL RELATIONS: ASPECTS OF COERCION AND EXPLOITATION

For analytical clarity, some issues like the relative positions of people belonging to different agrarian categories, land holding patterns, forms of labor, and sources of loans are elaborated very briefly, which may help us have a glimpse of the evolution of agrarian social structure in the Darjeeling Hills and the nature and extent of the agrarian relations and their linkage with the question of movement. As pointed out earlier, the provision of agrarian revenue administration during the colonial period was the abode of the *raiyats*, the real proprietor of all the estates of the tract, who held land as lease hold land for tilling purposes for certain fixed period on payment of regular rents charged by the government. However, among the *raiyats*, the actual tillers of the land, some were entrusted with special responsibilities of collection of rents (along with certain other duties for which they enjoyed special privileges too), who were called the *mandal*. Thus in government records the entire agrarian population was categorized generally as *raiyats* or specifically as two groups of *raiyats*: one group was represented simply as the assemblage of a group of *raiyats* who tilled the land, paid rents regularly, and renewed the lease on usual intervals, and the other group was represented by a smaller group of *mandal*, or a special category of *raiyats* who had performed other responsibilities entrusted upon them by the government, apart from paying rents, tilling the land, or renewing the lease of the tract they possessed regularly.

The phraseology “Book View” – popularized by Srinivas (2001:200) – involves the connotation of a critical methodological perspective that puts emphasis on the need to think beyond the gaze of Indological approaches while analyzing Indian social reality, overall and the system of caste or agrarian social structure, in particular. This “Book View” is being used here to pinpoint a similar process attempted by the Colonial Government machinery, which upheld only the *raiyats* and the *mandals* as two such categories that represented the entire gamut of the rural population, ignoring the historical existence of very many categories of subtenants who remained to be an integral part of the agrarian social structure of the region. It is surprising that despite the repeated insistence of Bell and Philpot in their respective Settlement Reports regarding the existence of a variety of subtenancies, the Colonial Government had never taken heed of either these notes or the actual social reality and denied the different subtenant categories any formal standing within the fold of revenue administration. Thus in Colonial Government records one can find only the existence of *raiyats*, those who held land in varying capacities, but no mention regarding the migrant people who came later and settled

in the Kalimpong Government Estate and engaged themselves in the agrarian production system mainly by linking with the existing *raiyats* as their subtenants. The point is that this group of new settlers, whose arrival remained continuous throughout the colonial period and even beyond that, were basically the land less people, although some of them managed some amount of land and became *raiyats*, but many of them failed to do so. Since the government never recorded in the rent roll any except the *raiyats*, we find no mention of the existence of the landless agricultural labor in the Darjeeling Hills until 1941, the last census completed under the colonial rule. That is why even after making several painstaking efforts one probably could not glean any authoritative information or any amount of quantitative data (except the succinct accounts of Bell or Philpot regarding this matter, which were also reproduced in different District Gazetteers of Darjeeling) regarding the existential reality of this group of subtenants who remained under the helm of the process of subinfeudation throughout the colonial period. It is in this context that the need to think beyond the “Book View” is suggested.

Apart from this “Book View,” which the colonial government had maintained regarding the agrarian social structure of the Darjeeling Hills, the social history of the *mandal* system suggests that it had given birth to three major forms of subtenancies, which remained operational – without the prior approval of the government – since the very beginning of settlement operations in the Darjeeling Hills. The first among these three forms of sub-tenancies was known as *adhia* and the remaining forms of sub-tenancies were *pakuria* and *kut*. In *adhia* sub-tenancy the *raiyat* paid the rent; the cost of the seed was deduced from the outrun, and the balance was divided between the *raiyat* and the subtenant (*adhiar*). The rice fields were let on the *adhia* system. A *pakuria* sub-tenancy was one in which the subtenant paid a fixed money rent to the *raiyat*. The rent of the *pakuria*, during the Third Settlement (1901–1903), ranged from two to three times of the revenue occasionally. This clearly suggests that the difference between revenue (paid by the *raiyat*) and rent (paid by the *pakuria*) went straightway to the pockets of the *raiyats* that contributed to the growth of their economic affluence. *Pakurias* had often also performed, for the *raiyat*, the coolie work that the *raiyat* was bound by his *patta* to render, mainly for the construction of the roads in the locality. Such forms of coerced labor, which was not actually their responsibility to perform, can give us the minuscule idea regarding the underdog position of the *pakurias* as the most subjugated category within the agrarian hierarchy of the Darjeeling Hills. A *kut* subtenant paid a fixed produce rent to the *raiyat*; the *raiyat* however, paid the revenue and the subtenant paid the cost of seed and all other expenses of

## THE LAND QUESTION AND ETHNICITY IN THE DARJEELING HILLS 99

cultivation. In the *makai* (maize) fields, during 1901-1903, one-third to one-half of the average production was the common form of bargain based on which the fixed produce rent of the *kutdar* was often decided. On a field of average fertility the *raiyat* had gained from Rs. 8 to Rs. 9, according to the form of contract made (Bell 1902).

As far as the terms and conditions of these three forms of sub-tenancies were concerned, it may fairly be deduced that the *pakuria* system was the most coercive, in which the subtenants neither had the option of bargaining while fixing the rent to be paid in cash by them, which as a rule remained an exorbitant one, nor could they even deny the coolie works needed to be performed by them (as free labor) as a condition of the system that provided them the opportunity to eke out their living. Moreover, there existed several other ways of exploitation too. Apart from paying the rent (in cash) at a much higher rate than the rate of revenue and providing the free unpaid labor, the subtenants often had to depend upon the local traders to whom they had to sell their produce in return for money, which they needed to repay rent to the *raiyat*. If this process failed to meet the monetary needs, they had no other option left but to engage in another chain of exploitation maintained by the local money lenders, from whom they borrowed money to fulfil the requirement. The point is that there remained every possibility to become exploited and dominated either by the *raiyat* or by the local traders or even by the local money lenders. Additionally, the contravention of the terms and conditions of the contract guaranteed eviction on the one hand and a further deterioration of the livelihood on the other. Lacking any land or any other alternative source of income, the 'nowhere' people remained always ready to come to terms with such a repressive system like *pakuria*. The *kut* and *adhia* forms of sub-tenancies provided a little bit more space to the *kutdars* and *adhiars* since they need not provide either the unpaid free labor or the rent in cash. However, the *raiyats*, even in these systems, had maintained an upper hand while settling the fixed produce rent (in case of the *kut system*) or while determining the cost of the seed to be deducted from the outrun (in case of the *adhia system*). Moreover, the presence of the local money lenders even in case of *kut* and *adhia* systems can largely be expected since in both the cases the under-*raiyats* had to meet the cost of production for which they often borrowed money, often at an exorbitant rate of interest. It may be argued that the sub-tenancy arrangements in the Darjeeling Hills brought in its trail indebtedness as a regular phenomenon and made the local money lenders an important category within the agrarian social system.

The importance of money lenders as an important category in the analysis of agrarian social structure of the Darjeeling Hills cannot simply be brushed aside

only since they do not participate in the agrarian production process, the way the peasants do participate. Although in most occasions the money lenders did not belong to a land owning class,<sup>14</sup> they played no less an exploitative role (mainly by providing commercial capital to those who were in dire need of the same – the under-*raiyats* or the subtenants) than the *mandals* and other big *raiyats* in the overall agricultural production system of the hills. The existence of the *kanyas* from the very beginning of Darjeeling's agrarian history may be treated as an indication of indebtedness as a usual agrarian practice in the hills. Again, taking a cue from Bell's settlement report that upholds that the Nepalis borrowed the most, and invariably from the *kanyas*, while the Bhutias and Lepchas preferred the local *mahajans* belonging to the Bhutia community and the Lepchas borrowed the least (Bell 1905:18), we may logically (the logic is based on the finding that sub-tenancy arrangements in the past necessitated substantial amount of borrowing) deduce that very few of the Lepchas (perhaps none), followed by the Bhutias and the Nepalis (the late comer migrants in particular, whose arrival remained a continuous process until the recent past) had acted as under-*raiyats*. Apart from these examples, the revenue administrative provisions made it mandatory that only the local people (Nepalis, Bhutias and Lepchas) could become the *raiyats*. What is suggested here is the fact that the entire rural social structure of the Darjeeling Hills had and (as we will show) still has been composed exclusively out of the hill communities and the *kanyas* (Marwaris) to some extent. In no situation the plainsmen/Bengalis were allowed to or had shown any interest in highland tilling.

#### AGRARIAN SOCIAL RELATIONS: PROCESSES OF COOPERATION AND MUTUALITY

It is pertinent here to comment that no social arrangement – how stratified it may be – can ever sustain for a longer period without being a just one. Here by the term just social arrangement we mean the existence of enough space for the reproduction/regeneration of cultural aspects of life of the individuals or that it

---

<sup>14</sup> However, occasionally some money lenders did possess sizable amounts of land and often their money lending capacity was the result of the increasing wealth that they accumulated by subletting their lands (mainly the kut and pakuria systems of sub-tenancy are the cases in point) or by selling the agricultural produce (mainly cardamom) in the market or by providing agricultural implements and cattle (usurious capital) on hire. These factors and forces had enabled the Nepalis and Bhutias, in particular among others, to emerge as indigenous money lenders who held both land and usurious capital unlike the Marwaris (*kanyas*) who only held commercial capital but possibly no fixed capital (land) which they could use.

## THE LAND QUESTION AND ETHNICITY IN THE DARJEELING HILLS 101

allows their differentiated bodies of constituents to spend their mundane life with mutual respect and cooperation for each other. The point is that while analyzing any social arrangement the overemphasis upon the class analysis or putting stress only on the relations of domination and exploitation may lose sight of another crucial domain of social relationship that maintained multiple spheres of mutual deference and cooperation among the different categories of population who might have shared contradictory class positions. Since sociology remains to be a discipline of studying relationships, how could one deny the coexistence of cooperation and conflict in any social system that existed for a pretty long time. Keeping in view such analytical proclivities, attempts have been made to comprehend the rural inequality situation in the Darjeeling Hills, which not only maintained classes and the relations of domination and exploitation, but also accommodated the different groups and communities who kept up relations of mutual respect and cooperation among themselves. Without analyzing the sphere of mutual responsibility sharing or of cooperation, one cannot answer such crucial questions like: why such structural arrangements had sustained even in the post-independent phase or that why a so-called exploitative structural arrangement had contributed toward the formation of ethnic movement that theoretically negates the ideas of class and class conflict?

In fact, social life in agrarian societies as opposed to their industrial counterpart is governed to a greater extent by personal ties and loyalties than by impersonal rules. Srinivas and B  teille have well-reminded us that social networks in agrarian societies are usually close-knit and have a multiplex character so that one's partner in work is also related to oneself in several other ways (Srinivas and B  teille 1964). The concern for agrarian social structure as a system incorporating the relations of cooperation and loyalties can help us understand other crucial processes of social significance, which often intermingle the realm of culture with that of political economy and vice-versa. The social history of the agrarian social structure of the hills sheds enough light on all these issues and processes and perhaps the systems of cooperation or the mutuality domain of the system explains why despite being an utterly exploitative arrangement, the agrarian hierarchy in the post-independent Darjeeling Hills maintained almost the same categories having almost similar connotations. While taking into consideration the hill agrarian situation it was observed that among the various structural units, which provided the basis for the kind of mutual role-relationship and cooperation that existed historically, the structural bases of kinship, locality (in the sense of *char chhimeki* or neighborhood), and forms of exchanging labor had reinforced each other.

Apart from its usual significance in the rural society, a particular form of kinship structure occurring in the hills deserves special mention. There prevails a system of indulging in fictive kinship bonds – both in male and female lines – among the Nepalis of the Darjeeling Hills. Although the origin of this spontaneous arrangement of ritual brotherhood and sisterhood had its roots in Nepal, in the Darjeeling Hills this system obviously had provided the new comers an opportunity to become socially entrenched, which involved establishing ceremonial relationship of brotherhood (*mit*) or sisterhood (*mitni*) with the members of those already settled households with whom they do not share any kinship ties. The field experience revealed that although the efficacy of *mit-mitni* relationship is almost non-existent among the younger generation – some even hardly heard about this arrangement – many senior informants, mainly belonging to *matwali* group, confirmed its existence in their lifetime. Often the urban informants had pointed out that they had their *mit* (ritual brother), *mit ba* (*mit* father) and *mit ama* (*mit* mother) in the village who looked after their ancestral property. An interesting case study also disclosed the fact in which a Bhutanese refugee had not secured a job, a ration card, and social recognition in Darjeeling town until he established a *mit* relationship with a young chap of his age and became his ritual brother.

It is undoubtedly true that the significance of *mit-mitni* relationship in the Darjeeling Hills has waned with the passage of time but wherever such relationships still exist they uniformly maintain its traditional moorings like, a Hindu religious root, continuance of incest barrier for generations, and no legal obligations (i.e., inheritance of property) whatsoever. The implication of ceremonial kinship in relation to the rural social structure, particularly in yesteryears, can be well assumed if we take into account the responses of those who still maintain *mit* relationship in the contemporary period. It can thus be well maintained that apart from its exploitative nature, the agrarian hierarchy of the past had provided a space to the downtrodden in societal terms, by assigning them new roles and responsibilities associated with the system of ritual brotherhood.

The form of labor exchange is another domain that explains why cooperation and mutuality is a likely phenomenon in the hierarchically arranged rural social structure of the hills. *Parma* and *huri* are the two forms of labor exchange commonly practiced throughout the hill agrarian belt in the past. While the *parma* system guarantees the rotational exchange of individual labor to each other's household (generally two households were involved), the *huri* scheme assures the rotational exchange of group labor for those households involved in such a scheme. Although both systems are out of the purview of cash payment, in *huri* system the

## THE LAND QUESTION AND ETHNICITY IN THE DARJEELING HILLS 103

services of the surplus labor remained marketable. This happens in such situations when the recipient household of *huri* services cannot use the labor provided by the entire group composed of as many as 20 persons and that household has the authority both to sell the services of surplus labor either in cash or kind and to enjoy the returns of the sold out labor. Both these forms of labor exchange underlie the strong cooperative spirit of the local communities who generally belong to the subordinate categories of rural hierarchy, such as the marginal farmers and/or the share croppers. These forms of labor exchange had been the ingenious creation of the earlier generation of people of the region when cultivation remained heavily labor intensive due to unfavorable soil type, which contained rugged terrain, undulating surface and often required clearing to prepare the ground for cultivation.

The locality or neighborhood happens to be a vital component of agrarian social structure that provides the basis for the networks of cooperation and mutual role responsibility spread among the incumbents of varied class background. In a region like the Darjeeling Hills where the frequent movements of people – due to migration and immigration – have been historically acknowledged, the significance of *char chhimeki*, a local term whose connotation involves at least three interrelated meanings: neighborhood, belongingness to the community, and a commonly shared past of co-residentiality, in developing the relationship of cooperation in non-economic terms can hardly be disregarded. The concept of *char chhimeki* has reinforced not only the forms of labor exchange but also brought the subordinated rural folk closer to their *maliks* or *pattadars* (landlords) at times of distress, economic or otherwise. In such situations the relations between landowners and landless were not always restricted to land or cultivation, but covered other spheres of life like providing aid – in cash or kind – in matters of familial occasions or festivities. Moreover, the linguistic cleavage and the frequency of intermarriage among different communities have helped the consolidation of *char chhimeki* in the rural society of the Darjeeling Hills.

This is a grave question and it needs to be stressed how adequately categorizing the different sections of the population engaged in highland tilling in the Darjeeling Hills into classes would be difficult?<sup>15</sup> The native categories like *kutdar*, *adhiar*,

---

<sup>15</sup> B  teille has also indicated the need of developing a critique on methodological grounds regarding the applicability of western concepts and categories in understanding Indian reality, overall and Indian rural society, in particular (B  teille 1974:48-49).



*pakhurey*, *khetala*,<sup>16</sup> and *gothela*<sup>17</sup> – engaged in highland tilling – are far from being clear-cut class categories. Moreover, the *parma* and *huri* forms of labor exchange, in fact, make the concept of class in the hill agrarian situation largely an amorphous one. Besides, the notion of *char chhimekey*, which contains the social arrangement of absorbing the continuous inflow of migrants within the rural social texture of the hills, had slowed the processes of brewing the caste-class nexus in the hills.

The point is that the personal networks of cooperation and loyalty have played a considerable role in the hill agrarian hierarchy, which however, did not make the class cleavage based on ownership of land and/or income an insignificant one, but it is proposed here that the issues of controlling individuals and groups as opposed to controlling land and property necessitates a social framework that need not always run at the dictates of property or income-based relations. It is in this context the *mit-mitni* relationship, the notion of *char chhimekey*, and *parma-huri* systems of labor exchange – all of which contribute to the formation of a close-knit network of relationships in the hill agrarian situation throughout the decades – become significant. The continuous inflow of the migrants into the hills has been the single most important factor that resulted into (the detailed analysis is provided in the next section) the unprecedented growth of landless agricultural laborers on the one hand and a declining size of per-capita land holding in each census years, on the other, which undoubtedly restricted the prospect for class line polarization within the agrarian hierarchy. Moreover, lacking any organized political mobilization by any political party to raise consciousness among the peasants based on class line polarization, the cultural realm predominated over the scene and helped maintain – instead of overthrowing – an exploitative rural social structure in the Darjeeling Hills.

---

<sup>16</sup>The *khetalas* perform all kinds of agricultural operations and are much like the agricultural laborers, employed on daily wage basis or on contract. When employed on contract they were being paid in kind.

<sup>17</sup>The *gothelas* are laborers employed throughout the year who perform all kinds of activities as desired by their employer for which they get no wage but the food and shelter. Although this arrangement may seem like bonded labor but its significance lies in the fact that this form of labor provided the nowhere people – the immigrants whose expansion remained historically steady – a ready assurance of both livelihood and habitation.

## THE LAND QUESTION AND ETHNICITY IN THE DARJEELING HILLS 105

## POST-COLONIAL AGRARIAN REFORM AND THE HILL AGRARIAN SOCIETY

With India's independence the Darjeeling Hills has been brought under the uniform legislative measures promulgated by the Government of West Bengal throughout the state on the issue of land. Two such legislations were of enormous significance that brought fundamental changes in the rural social structure of the state of West Bengal overall. The first was the West Bengal Estates Acquisition Act (WBEAA) of 1953, passed on February 12, 1954 and extended by stages to cover the entire State, which attempted to eliminate – among other things – the interests of the *zamindars* and other intermediaries by acquisition on payment of compensation. Although the WBEAA of 1953 had successfully met the need of besieging any further growth of a feudal seeming social order throughout the countryside of the State, it remained largely ineffective in the Darjeeling Hills. The Darjeeling Hills<sup>18</sup> was described as 'waste land' and stayed outside the purview of both the Permanent Settlement of 1793 and Bengal Tenancy Act, 1885. Under Regulation III of 1828 all 'waste lands' were declared as Crown's property, hence the question of *zaminadari* does not arise in the Darjeeling Hills. Consequently, the provisions of Estate Acquisition Act, which might have brought significant changes in rural West Bengal, have failed to bring forth a similar corollary for the hill region of the district of Darjeeling. Perhaps this was due to this underlying factor that both the tea gardens and hill land of the Darjeeling district were exempted from the stipulation for a ceiling on existing holdings at 25 acres in respect of agricultural lands according to the provisions of the WBEAA of 1953, which was applied uniformly throughout the state (GOI 1966: 151). The exemption of the Darjeeling Hills from the ceiling rider maintained up to the late 1970s until the provisions of West Bengal Land Reforms Act (WBLRA) 1955 were promulgated for the first time on January 1, 1978.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Fifteen mouzas under the Siliguri police station and three mouzas under the Phansidewa police station, which effectively constituted the plains region of the District, however, were not categorized as 'waste land' and thus remained amenable to both the provisions of Permanent Settlement of 1793 and also to the Bengal Tenancy Act, 1885.

<sup>19</sup> Enforcement of WBLRA of 1955 began with a few sections in 1956, more came in 1965 and by 1971 most of the sections were in operation excepting the Darjeeling Hills. The exemption of the Darjeeling Hills from the proviso of WBLRA of 1955 until 1978 was a statutory decision undertaken according to the terms of the said Act. Section 14R, Subsection (b) of the WBLRA of 1955, for example, upholds that the ceiling limit (i.e., the provisions of section 14M of the said Act that maintains ceiling related provisions) does not apply for such periods as may be specified by the state

The measures to do away with the *zamindari* system (i.e., the Estates Acquisition Act 1953) necessitated corresponding changes in the tenural and land ceiling arrangements. This has been done through the promulgation of the WBLRA of 1955, which contained provisions for the fixing of the upper limit of the ceiling. According to the stipulations of the said Act (WBLRA 1955a), the ceiling area ranges from 2.50 standard hectares for an unmarried adult to a maximum of seven standard hectares for an owner with a nine-member family. It needs mention here that the ceiling limit had been unanimously applied in all districts but the state had the authority to allow the landowners to hold more lands than the ceiling limit if they intend to establish tea gardens (WBLRA 1955b). Moreover, the Government of West Bengal since 1978 had given special emphasis (on Clause 50 of WBLRA, 1955) to record the name of the *bargadars* (sharecroppers) in the record-of-rights to prevent their frequent evictions and thereby to guarantee tenural security to the *bargadars* under the program called *operation barga*. The land reform measures adopted by the Left Front Government (LFG) since 1978 also consisted of the program of redistributing ceiling surplus land among rural landless/land poor households. Although the successful implementation of both the reform measures (i.e., tenural security and land redistribution) throughout the state had enabled West Bengal to acquire global recognition for running successfully a ruling machinery that carried out the principle of redistribution of resources amid a liberal bourgeois democratic national set up, the Darjeeling Hills stands out to be an exception to such a success story.

The difficulty to get hold of authentic quantitative data on land is well known. Moreover, another problem was that the available data – no matter how scanty it may be – on Darjeeling maintained as a whole the district picture. It is proposed here that lacking hills-plains distinction of data sources on the issue of land, any attempt to assess the implication of land reform in the Darjeeling Hills would be both an unrealistic and unfair exercise. While maintaining a closer look at the facts of agrarian reforms in West Bengal since 1977, Dasgupta (2006) has provided a gloomy picture of land reform particularly in the District of Darjeeling. Data regarding the district wide progress of programs of agrarian reform in Dasgupta's (2006) work reveals that up to 2003 the percentage of area under reform in the Darjeeling District was 13.69. While the area recorded under *operation barga* was as low as 7012 hectares (4.90%), the area of land redistributed was moderately high

---

Government, by notification in the Official Gazette, to any land in such hilly portions of the district of Darjeeling as may be specified in the said notification (WBLRA 1955).

## THE LAND QUESTION AND ETHNICITY IN THE DARJEELING HILLS 107

12,575 hectares (8.79%). The number of *bargadars* recorded under *operation barga* in the Darjeeling District – the same source maintained – is 12,879 (9.17% of the total 140,506 number of agricultural workers) and the figure for land reform beneficiaries is 51,991 (37% of the total agricultural workers). Dasgupta also noted that in the figures on perceived security, Darjeeling (and also Jalpaiguri) District occupied the alarmingly high proportion (47%) of *bargadars*, who feel insecure about their rights as tenants.

The analysis maintained so far showed in more than one way the fact that Darjeeling District had made modest progress in implementing agrarian reform measures. Although the overall district data often represent a reasonably gleaming picture regarding the impact of some reform measures, the state of affairs in the hill region of the district is not as substantial as it appears in the wholesome district profile. However, to maintain a study on the land question in the Darjeeling Hills, that too lacking a hills-plains division of data sources, may be a challenging but not an impossible task. Some qualitative information in this regard may help us deduce the prospect of agrarian reforms in the Darjeeling Hills, if any.

## POST-REFORM HILL AGRARIAN SOCIETY: STAGNATION AND MARGINALIZATION

In fact, the scope for agrarian reforms remained largely limited in the Darjeeling Hills due to several innate constraints the hill people have no control over. For example, the large forest coverage<sup>20</sup> of the district happens to be a natural barrier to usher in faster agricultural growth in the hills. Moreover, a sizable amount of agricultural land had been brought under non-agricultural uses (i.e., plantation). The remaining portion of the agrarian belt of the hill region is often made up of rugged terrain and undulating soil types. To bring more lands under cultivation is also not ecologically feasible. Besides all these factors, the uninterrupted migration had resulted in a significant decrease in the average size of land holdings, particularly in the hills. Moreover, migration happened to be one of those crucial factors that restricted the proper implementation of *operation barga* in a significant way.

Apart from these historical factors and ecological limits that hampered the smooth progress of reform measures promulgated by the LFG in West Bengal,

---

<sup>20</sup> According to the 2001 Census data more than 38% of the total geographical area of the district is under forest, in earlier Census decades the percentage share of forest coverage remained higher and if we consider only the case of the hill subdivisions forest coverage amounts to be around 49% of the total geographical space.

some structural changes have definitely taken place in the hill agrarian social structure. For example, the *mandal* system of yesteryears has faded away. Although *mandals* can still be found in some isolated corners of the hill rural areas, they have lost their erstwhile power, privileges and positions in the rural hierarchy. The rapid spread of decentralized forms of governance had, in fact, made *mandals'* vigor and vitality in the rural social structure of the hills a bygone story. After independence, overall and in the post-reform era, the hill agrarian hierarchy contains mainly two categories of population – rubbing out the intermediaries in-between – landowners (locally known as *pattadars* or as *maliks*) at one extreme and agricultural workers (*khetala*) of various sorts, including the sharecroppers (*pakhurey* or *kuthia*), at the other. While examining the causes of the sharp increase in agricultural laborers in the northern districts (including Darjeeling) of West Bengal during 1961-71, Bandyopadhyaya (1977:A-125) has noted that the *pakhureys* of the Darjeeling Hills are generally poor migrants from adjoining hills and mostly belong to the Nepali community, and in the overwhelming number of cases the *pakhureys* had enumerated themselves as agricultural laborers and not as sharecroppers. Chaudhuri (1985:101-102) has also pointed out that governmental measures and Comprehensive Area Development Programme (CADP) initiatives have grossly failed to encourage the *pakhureys* to identify themselves as sharecroppers. Subba (1985:82) has also noted the abrupt emergence of sharecroppers' associations in the style of Pakhurey Sangh during the late 1970s in some villages of Kalimpong like Echhay and Pudung where a sizeable amount of evictions took place and also the sudden death of such associations within a year or so.

It is proposed here that apart from the close-knit network of the rural society, the migratory background of the *pakhureys* perhaps discouraged them from becoming government notified *bargadars* (sharecroppers). Because they were migrants, the *pakhureys* were more often than not landless and the lots of land they sharecropped was of poor quality so they had to depend – sometimes – thoroughly upon their *pattadars*, even for the basic minimum inputs needed for tilling. Amid such situations, the surfacing of a patrimonial bond between the *pattadar* and *pakhurey* – particularly when both of them belonged to the same community or to the same lineage – is usual, which in fact led them to consider the position of *bargadar* as an incompatible status to the spirit of their everyday lives. Another noticeable change that occurred in the post-reform era is the process of labor commodification. That is to say that the issue of labor, which remained entwined with the community earlier, has been brought to the market. In other words, the reform measures had led the *pattadars* either to opt for self cultivation or to employ

## THE LAND QUESTION AND ETHNICITY IN THE DARJEELING HILLS 109

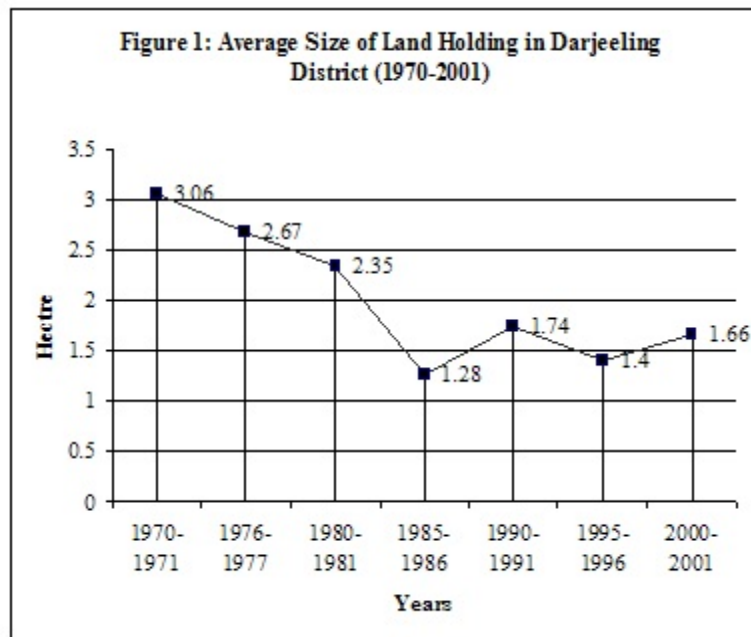
agricultural laborers (*Khetalas*) on a daily wage basis when they needed them but rarely to depend on the earlier forms of exchange labor (*parma* and *huri* systems of labor exchange) or to engage the sharecroppers. Highland tilling in Darjeeling now-a-days solely depends upon the agricultural laborers. This also explains why there has been a sharp increase in the category of agricultural laborers in the last few decades. The earlier organic unity of the primary producers with the means of production has been thoroughly challenged in the contemporary rural Darjeeling Hills.

Although the declining trend of per-capita land holding in the hill agrarian belt has had a colonial legacy of its own, the vulnerability of the process had never been as acute as it is now. The ceaseless migration in the post-colonial Darjeeling Hills had deteriorated the agrarian situation to the extent of no return. Without the labor absorbing capacity of the plantations, coupled with the land locked nature of the agrarian sector of the hills, the rural mass has been experiencing the heavy yoke of a decreasing land-man ratio. This becomes clear when we see that though rural areas contained a sizeable section of the hill population (72.81% of the total hill population according to 2001 Census), it had showed a declining trend of growth.<sup>21</sup> That means people are moving out from the villages in search of livelihood and one possible reason behind such a process of rural out migration in the hills is the scarcity of arable plots for a growing population. However, this is not to argue that the waning rate of land-man ratio had negative effects only for the rural mass. In fact, both urban and rural areas in the hills had experienced the vulnerability of the process but in different degrees.

The diagram (see Figure 1) clearly shows the downsizing rate of average land holdings in the district during the last 30 years. The average size of land holding, as the diagram illustrates, has been decreasing from 3.06 hectares during 1970-71 to 1.66 hectares during 2000-2001. The mounting pressure of migration had in fact furthered the decline of the land-man ratio in the hills, and this process has resulted in the acutely felt need for homestead land, and consequently, the large scale encroachment of government *khas mahals*, illegal clearing of lands, became common even in the urban areas too. In the rural areas, apart from the dire need of homestead lands, the declining land-man ratio has given birth to an unprecedented

---

<sup>21</sup> Although the size of rural population in the hills according to the 2001 Census data contains more than two-thirds of the total hill population of the District, in earlier census decades the percentage share of the hill rural population happened to be much higher than its urban counterpart. During the last three census decades (1971-1991), the rural population was 76.29% (1991 Census), 77.56% (1981 Census) and 82.76% (1971 Census) of the total hill population.



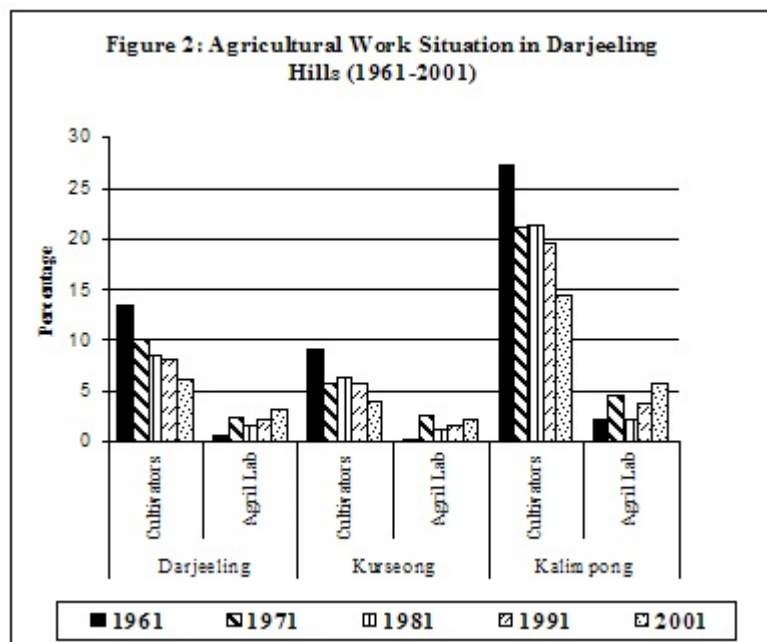
**SOURCE:** Computed from District Statistical Handbooks: Darjeeling District (1970 – 2001).

growth of landless agricultural laborers – a new segment of agrarian category – who remained conspicuously absent in census figures before 1951, and whose growth had been snowballing in each census decade thereafter.

In fact, the declining trend of the average land holding size and the smaller size of the holdings severely limits the scope of land distribution in the hill areas, and the benefit to be accrued therefrom. Consequently, the likelihood of surplus land extraction from those who hold more than the government-stipulated ceiling of seven standard hectares of land and their redistribution is extremely limited. The unavailability of arable lands, restricted application of the land ceiling and redistribution, population pressure, no attempt of agricultural diversification, and the declining land man ratio have created many landless agricultural laborers throughout the rural belt of the hills. Since labor remained a surplus in the agricultural sector (as well as in the plantations), the agricultural laborers in the hills remained prone to exploitation and discrimination. Besides the unprecedented growth of agricultural laborers, the bleak agrarian scenario in the hills is also characterized by a sharp decline in the volume of cultivators during the past few decades. In fact, the percentage of cultivators is declining faster than the percentage growth of agricultural laborers in Darjeeling hills (see Figure 2). Agriculture became less rewarding and the significance of the primary sector in the hill economy has been taken over by secondary and tertiary sectors. This is, however,

## THE LAND QUESTION AND ETHNICITY IN THE DARJEELING HILLS 111

true for the entire East India. Although after independence, tribal land alienation<sup>22</sup> had been legally prohibited but land fragmentation remained a problematic issue. The plausible existence of a crisis in the hill agrarian situation can reasonably be deduced from the above analysis.



**SOURCE:** Computed from District Census Handbooks: Darjeeling District (1961 – 2001).

While the challenges of subinfeudation, land alienation, and economic disparity that crept into the hill agrarian situation in colonial times were harmoniously resolved within the organic unity of the primary producers with the means of production, the post-colonial agrarian situation in the hills showed a declining trend, not only in the number of cultivators and agricultural production, but also in the growth of landless laborers and diminishing size of per-capita landholdings in every subsequent census year. As will be shown, all these processes have had their cumulative effects in breaking down the earlier organic unity of the primary producers with the means of production, which largely characterized the colonial agrarian social formation of the Darjeeling Hills, and are indicative enough that the rural areas in the hills have remained crisis ridden over the years.

<sup>22</sup>Tribal land alienation is that phenomenon that suggests that the tribes are losing their land either by entering into the land market, or for the necessity of development programs/ projects, or for the repayment of debt etc.



The analysis maintained so far has attempted to delineate the deteriorating status of the hill agrarian situation – a major foundations of hill social formation – which caused marginality as an unavoidable reality for a sizeable section of the hill population. It deserves mention in this regard that in no way could the plainsmen or the Bengalis be held responsible for their marginality in their own soil, since both the plainsmen and the Bengalis, as argued earlier, had remained conspicuously absent in the agrarian social structure of the hills. However, there is no denying the fact that in the spheres of tea plantation and white collar job sector the plainsmen, mostly the Bengalis, have enjoyed an advantageous position ever since the history of the hill station. The point is that the roots of marginality or deprivation, as it occurred in the hill agrarian sector, is embedded in the political economy of the hills itself. Another crucial question that needs investigation is how a social system that contained the inbuilt forces of its own adversity had shown the way of crusading against the ethnic ‘other’? Hence, it becomes imperative to emphasize on the issue: how had the agrarian sector in the hills contributed to the length and breadth of an ethnic movement? How had the structures of deprivation, discrimination and exploitation been successfully addressed in ethnic idioms, when they theoretically remained amenable to class conflicts?

#### AGRARIAN CRISIS AND ETHNIC MOVEMENT: THE PROCESSUAL LINKAGE

To probe into the above raised questions, it is proposed here that the agrarian social system in the hills had been constituted of the asymmetrical interrelations among its members, which prepared the grounds of domination, competition and exploitation. To conceptualize the spatio-temporal specificities of the rural social system of the hills theoretically, it may be argued that during colonial times the social system of our reference had invariably been the result of a political economy characterized by the organic unity of the primary producers with the means of production, a disposition that as a rule remains common to pre-capitalist rural social formations. However, with the passage of time, and more particularly during the last three decades or so, the period when the entire rural belt of the country had experienced the onslaught of capitalist penetration in some form or the other, the rural social system in the hills had undergone similar transformations, which destroyed the earlier unity of labor with the means of production and given birth to a huge body laborers who hardly possessed the means of production, but were in dire need of eking out their lives. Some vulnerable others were even in need of a patch of land for habitation. Thus, the high proportion of the rural population,

## THE LAND QUESTION AND ETHNICITY IN THE DARJEELING HILLS 113

high proportion of landless agricultural workers, high proportion of non-firm activities, and low proportion of cultivators – all these indicate that the process of primitive accumulation of capital, which dismantled the earlier organic composition of the rural social system and increasingly removed the peasants from their lands and other means of production, remained at work in the hills.

However, there existed – during the last few decades in India – a parallel process of *governmentality*, which provided the ‘livelihood needs’ to those who were affected by the effects of the primitive accumulation of capital. Kalyan Sanyal (2007) has labeled these processes as the *reversal effects of the primitive accumulation* that ran parallel with the process of primitive accumulation and are maintained through technologies of post-colonial capitalist state apparatuses. This has also been the case in the hills. With the flagging size of land holdings, declining rate of the cultivators, and increase in the number of landless agricultural laborers – all of which were a sign of primitive accumulation – the post-colonial capitalist state adopted the mechanisms of direct intervention by initiating ‘livelihood need’-oriented policies and programs, which in fact attempted to reverse the effects of primitive accumulation. The host of rural development programs like NREGS, IAY, PDS, ICDS, MSK, SSK, SGSY, IWDP, SGRY, CRSP, PMGSY, NSAP<sup>23</sup> among others, which are in operation in the district and elsewhere in the state, were the measures to meet the livelihood needs of the masses through alternative ways.

However, this is not so with the new settlers who remained confined mostly in the urban spaces, who were engaged in the informal sector and desirous either to have a plot of land to be used as a homestead or to get their already encroached tract legalized. It is needless to mention that such claims were hardly met by the same process outlined by Sanyal (2007). This situation could be better explained by using the notion of ‘political society’ as analyzed by Partha Chatterjee (2006; 2008) in his recent works. The members of this political society are not the proper members of civil society and are not regarded as such by the institutions of the state. Yet it is not as though they are outside the reach of the state or even excluded from the domain of politics (Chatterjee 2006:38). More often than not, these groups

---

<sup>23</sup> NREGS stands for National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, IAY stands for Indira Awas Yojana, PDS stands for Public Distribution System, ICDS stands for Integrated Child Development Services, MSK stands for Madhyamik Siksha Karmasuchi, SSK stands for Sishu Siksha Karmasuchi, SGSY stands for Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana, IWDP stands for Integrated Watershed Development Program, SGRY stands for Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojna, CRSP stands for Central Rural Sanitation Program, PMGSY stands for Pradhan Mantri Gram Sarak Yojna, NSAP stands for National Social Assistance Programme.

pay no heed to the disciplinary practices of the pedagogic state like citizenry, legality or entitlement. Although the state did not consider the members belonging to this political society as proper citizens, this hardly prevents them either clamoring for habitation and/or livelihood as a matter of right. This is practically the situation in the Darjeeling Hills. It is proposed that, at the level of this crucial juncture, characterized by the split of the two domains of politics ('civil' and 'political'), the land question contributes to the call for a statehood movement, which in fact appeared as a handy tool for the bemoaned mass of the political society to get their aspirations fulfilled, which otherwise would have remained unsatisfied within the given discourses of legibility and legality upheld by the discursive state structure. This is what has happened in the Darjeeling Hills as far as the question of land is concerned.

Hence, the land question in the Gorkhaland movement has appeared as an issue of paramount significance to which Subhas Ghising – the chief architect of Gorkhaland movement – had remained unequivocally vocal. The catchphrases like "*Gorkhaland ani Gorkhako apno mato prapt garne andolan huncho*" (Gorkhaland is the movement for one's own soil), or "*Bangal hamro chihan ho / Gorkhaland hamro bihan ho / Gorkha chihanma basteina*" (Bengal is like our cemetery / Gorkhaland is the new dawn / Gorkhas wouldn't reside in cemetery), or "*Bangal bato hamro mato pharke deo*" (Tear apart our land from Bengal) have not only served the purpose of being a successful tactic for ethnic mobilization, but also these popular slogans have metaphorically represented the aspirations of the members of 'political society,' which remained embedded in the material contextualities of everyday life. All these perhaps explain why Kalimpong, where '*mato ka prashna*' (land question) had remained far more acute than any other part of the hills for possessing a predominantly agrarian character, happened to be the hottest belt of the Gorkhaland movement during the turbulent mid-1980s. Furthermore, Ghising had also attempted to ignite the mass sentiment of the rural folk of two other hill subdivisions by the same token of '*mato ka prashna*,' but the strategy did not work well, since the situation was not as vulnerable as often happened with the Kalimpong subdivision. As a result he had to depend upon the fringe areas of urban centers of the Darjeeling Hills, which provided space to a huge body of new settlers who came over to Darjeeling to eke out a living. These sections of population resemble Chatterjee's notion of 'political society' who were in need of both livelihood and habitation.

Fascinatingly, Ghising himself was one among the members of such a 'political society' who was evicted in 1979 from the illegally occupied land in Darjeeling

## THE LAND QUESTION AND ETHNICITY IN THE DARJEELING HILLS 115

town in which he built a house. Within two days of his expulsion, posters appeared in Darjeeling with his signature demanding its separation from West Bengal (Pandit 1986: 44). The significance of land question in the Gorkhaland movement appeared in black and white, for the first time, as a leaflet – Bulletin No. 1 of the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) – circulated on August 27, 1980. The first two sentences (printed in English capital letters) of the leaflet are worth quoting: “RETURN OUR LAND FROM BENGAL!! BENGAL IS NOT THE MASTER OF OUR LAND!!” The said leaflet (i.e., the Bulletin No.1 of the GNLF) also maintained in the clause nos. 5 and 6 (in Nepali, translation mine) regarding the sketch plan of the proposed Gorkhaland state that all possible arrangements would be made to redistribute the surplus land of town-market places, and of plantations for homestead and cultivation (clause 5) and *patta* will be given to those land holders who resided in the plantation areas and had been tilling a piece of land for generations without any legal entitlement (clause 6). The field experience enabled me to apprehend that even today in the hills there exist many people like Ghising was in 1979, a fact to which Ghising had never been unaware of and used the same to the furthest possible extent since his emergence as the messiah of the Gorkhas of the Darjeeling Hills. It is not surprising to learn that this segment of the urban populace had nothing to lose and the most violent segment and/or the sacrificing elements from among the movement participants – the members of Gorkha Volunteers Crops (GVC), for example – were essentially composed of them. Again a characteristic difference among the movement participants had also been noticed during the field work. In earlier times Ghising had taken pains to arrange for a gathering to listen to his arguments. Largely tea plantation laborers and the village folk from the neighboring villages had been the usual participants of the innumerable public meetings that he carried out. However, the mature Ghising had depended mainly upon the urban centers that contained sizeable section of the members of the ‘political society’ – the nowhere people – as his immediate addressees. This explains why just a call of a meeting or a rally had gathered many participants of no less than a thousand souls within the interval of a few hours.

## CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The point is that if the colonial agrarian situation in the hills had reflected the typicalities of pre-capitalist social formation, the post-colonial social formation in the hills has remained under the grip of primitive accumulation of capital. That is to say that a transformation has already taken place in the post-colonial hill peasant

economy more in tune with the pan-Indic trend,<sup>24</sup> which showed a shift from a subsistence-based economy to market or capital-oriented economy. Subba's findings are worth considering in this regard. While studying the agrarian relations in the Darjeeling Hills in the mid-1980s, he observed that: "In the hill areas of Darjeeling the economy has been gradually shifting from self-consumption to the market-based *one*, thereby enhancing the importance of the market and the businessmen in local economic activities. Even in the remote villages without proper communication facilities, the cultivation of cash crops like ginger is expanding steadily. This is inevitable in a place where the economy is totally monetized and the need for cash is growing" (Subba 1985: 21 emphasis added). This is, however, the characteristic of all of India. In this process of transformation Subba well-reminded us that the most benefitted people happened to be those who had capital in their possession like the Marwaris and Biharis (who hailed from the plains of the Indian mainland, possibly not from Bengal) and to some extent the Newars (the Nepali business caste group) (Subba 1985). The findings of other studies substantiate our arguments posed above. For example, the cumulative effect of population growth upon the diminishing trend of per-capita cultivable land has been the analytical foci of C. R. Paul's study (Paul 1986), De (1978) had shown the increasing insignificance of cultivation as the primary occupation in the hills, and, similarly Mitra and Ray's (1985) study revealed a shift of workers away from cultivation and the rising importance of non-farm activities in the hill villages. Apart from the findings of these studies, which amply prove the prevalence of *primitive accumulation*, or in other words the transformation of hill peasant economy along the path of capitalist growth, the observations of other scholars indicate the feasibility of applying Chatterjee's notion of 'political society.' Since the late 1960s the trend of new settlements was traced out by Jyotirmay Sen (1986). The study researched how the migrant population had developed new village settlements in the Darjeeling Hills, like Dudhia, which hardly existed before 1965, by mainly encroaching upon the government *Khasmahal* lands. While most of the new settlers of this village had migrated from within the hills, some others hailed from Nepal. Villages of this type and the squatter settlements of the urban spaces in the hills are amenable to the analytical category of 'political society,' which we used. The population stock of this 'political society' remained vital to the strength and vivacity of the Gorkhaland movement.

---

<sup>24</sup> For a detailed discussion on the changing pattern of peasant economy and its corresponding effects on the agrarian social structure in India, overall, view Gupta's article (Gupta 2005: 751-758).

## THE LAND QUESTION AND ETHNICITY IN THE DARJEELING HILLS 117

The argument we posit here is that the endeavor to delineate the hill agrarian situation by positioning it within the elemental analytic frame of ethnic 'we' vs. outsider 'they' components of ethnicity would be a futile exercise, since the existence of the 'other' is inconsequential in the agrarian social formation of the studied region. In other words, the agrarian structure of the hills is not contributing to the ethnic movement simply because it contains ethnic co-nationals within its gamut, rather it is the inbuilt crisis of the system that caught up the ethnic groups in the cacophony of the statehood movement, perceiving the same as a way out of the contemporary agrarian impasse. It needs mention that the peasant economy in the hills is not transforming to the agendas set out by the ethnic entrepreneurs, but the impetus of change is taking place in the villages themselves. Again, in our attempt to situate the rural mass within the trajectory of an ethnic movement, the issue of identity remained obfuscated as far as its post-structuralist lineage – that puts singular emphasis on the limitless potential of the non-material/post-material underneath the discourse of identity – is concerned. It is proposed here that '*matoka prasna*' (land question) is out and out a material provocation that constituted and reconstituted the ethnic aspirations of the hill peasantry. In other words, the Gorkha dreaming of self rule did engage with these prior formations composed of material predispositions, leading to the emergence of hybrids, and sometimes superimposes materiality beyond the so-called post material spirit of ethnicity to restructure the mundane life courses. The point is that although ethnic phenomena or the question of identity may involve ceaseless constructions, more often than not they were based on limited spatio-temporal exigencies of routine life, which remain processually linked with the material inclinations in some form or the other. This is how the material is embedded in the cultural, which helps us comprehend the salience of the land question in Gorkha ethnicity.

Before we conclude this exercise, bringing back Althusser again is worthwhile. What is meant here is that the central argument of the present paper is that ethnicity may be an issue overloaded with cultural imperatives but given scrutiny it shows that ethnicity does have a material root, which no longer remains to be silent when viewed through such crucial issues like land and agrarian social structure. The point is that even if dwelling upon the material basis of the ethnicity might be possible, in reality it was a very complex process that brings closer both the material and cultural. That is to say that not only the agrarian structure in Darjeeling hills remains to be simply exploitative, but simultaneously it provided the space in which both the material and cultural life continuously got reproduced in their own rhythm. That is why, as we have seen in the present essay, both the

contentious relations between several classes, as well as the domains of mutuality and cooperation, have contributed to the urge for a separate state of Gorkhaland for the ethnic Gorkhas. The point is that neither for the sake of theory, or for that matter for already existing conceptual nuances of a social issue or event, can we overlook the given social reality. Nor even for building up a particular thesis, can we reduce the existing social reality to that extent of arriving at a pejorative understanding of the whole issue under consideration.

These considerations explain why an Althusserian notion of social formation or the concept of *overdetermination* is relevant in grasping the merit of the present study. Darjeeling has been viewed as a social formation essentially because it resulted out of multiple modes of production (although the present study concentrated only on one) and simultaneously the problematic of ethnicity can hardly be comprehended unless it is addressed keeping in view this complex network and rhythm of the different agents and social bodies and cultural practices emerged as relevant forces and processes in determining the courses of hill history and the metamorphosis of hill agrarian structure. The claim of Gorkhaland in this sense is not and cannot be the result of simple cultural permutations and combinations, nor had it been determined by the material considerations, but on the contrary the historicity of the region and especially its agrarian sector amply show that it had been the result of a complex, though well-knitted network of relations, which sometimes got determined by cultural issues, sometimes by communitarian ethos, and sometimes by kinship networks, but ultimately by the economic factors. There is every possibility that in several other occasions the non-economic factors may have played the determining role. Our historical sketch of the evolution of agrarian structure in the Darjeeling Hills has occasionally referred to such factors and forces (like kinship network, mutuality and cooperation maintained among the people of varied class background for the sake of the continuance of the production process itself) which did not emanate from the material basis of the society. However, the contribution of such non-economic social networks to augmenting the cause of ethnicity in Darjeeling can hardly be ignored. Ethnicity, in the Darjeeling Hills, in this sense becomes *overdetermined* and finally takes recourse to the economic realities but only in the last instance.

#### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

**Swatahsiddha Sarkar** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology, University of North Bengal (Darjeeling, India). Besides having a handful of published research articles in academic journals and edited volumes, the author

THE LAND QUESTION AND ETHNICITY IN THE DARJEELING HILLS 119

keeps up keen interest in areas like rural sociology, historical sociology, ethnography of state, ethnicity and movement. The author is an M. Phil. in Himalayan Studies and recently submitted his Doctoral Thesis on Gorkha ethnicity and movement in the Department of Sociology, Delhi School of Economics, Delhi University (India).

REFERENCES

- Althusser, Louis. 1997. *For Marx*. (translated by Ben Brewster) London: Verso Classics.
- Bell, C. A. 1902. *Rate Report for the Kalimpong Government Estate*, No. 54S. submitted to the Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling on 3<sup>rd</sup> May. Darjeeling, India: DM Office Record Room.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1905. *Final Report of the Survey and Settlement of the Kalimpong Estate in the District of Darjeeling: 1901-1903*. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press.
- Béteille, André. 1974. *Studies in Agrarian Social Structure*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Bura Magar, Harsha Bahadur. 1994. *Is Gorkhaland a reality or simply a Mirage?* Kathmandu, Nepal: Deeptara Press.
- Chadha, Vivek Lt. Col. 2005. *Low Intensity Conflicts in India: An Analysis*. New Delhi: Sage.
- Chakrabarty, Milindo. 1988. "Gorkhaland agitation in the light of IRDP implementation policies," *unpublished paper*. Centre for Himalayan Studies. Darjeeling, India: University of North Bengal.
- Chatterjee, Partha. 2006. *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*. Delhi: Permanent Black.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2008. "Democracy and Economic Transformation in India." *Occasional Papers (New Series)*, No. 3. Department of Sociology, Delhi School of Economics. Delhi: Delhi University.
- Dasgupta, Anirban. 2006. "Agrarian reforms in West Bengal since 1977." *Abridged on -line version Phd Dissertation*. University of California: Riverside. Retrieved December 12, 2009 (<http://www.Economics.ucr.edu/seminars/winter05/ped/ped03092005.pdf>)
- Dasgupta, Atish. 1999. "Ethnic Problems and Movements for Autonomy in Darjeeling." *Social Scientist* 27(11-12):47-68.
- Dasgupta, Manas. 1988. "The Gorkhaland Agitation in Darjeeling: Some Political and Economic Dimensions." *Special Lecture*, No. IX. Centre for Himalayan Studies, Darjeeling, India: University of North Bengal.



- Dash, Arthur J. 1947. *Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling*. Calcutta: Government Printing.
- Datta, Prabhat. 1991. "The Gorkhaland Agitation in West Bengal." *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 52(2):225–41.
- De, Pranab Jyoti. 1978. "Study of a Market in Darjeeling District." *Bulletin of the Anthropological Survey of India* 27(1-2):88–94.
- Ganguly, Rajat. 2005. "Poverty, Malgovernance and Ethno-political Mobilisation: Gorkha Nationalism and the Gorkhaland Agitation in India." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 11(4):467–502.
- GOI (Government of India). 1966. *Implementation of Land Reforms: A Review by the Land Reforms Implementation Committee of the National Development Council*. New Delhi: Planning Commission.
- Gupta, Dipankar. 2005. "Whither the Indian Village: Culture and Agriculture in 'Rural' India." *Economic and Political Weekly* 40(8):751–8.
- Hunter, W. W. 1974 (1876). *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, Vol. X. Delhi: D. K. Publishing House.
- Lama, Mahendra P. 1988. "Gorkhaland Movement: A Perspective Economic Analysis." *Himalaya Today* 1(1):5–9.
- McHenry Jr., Dean E. 2007. "Is Economic Inequality a Foundation of Separatist Identity? An Examination of Successful and Unsuccessful Movements in India." *Unpublished paper* presented at the Annual Meeting of Asian Studies on the Pacific Coast (ASPAC) held on June 15–17. Honolulu, Hawaii. Retrieved October 12, 2007 (<http://www.cgu.edu/PDFFiles/SPE/workingpapers/politics/ASPAC%20Inequality%20and%20Separatist%20Identity.Pdf>).
- Melucci, Alberto. 1996. *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Mitra, J. C. 1927. *Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the Darjeeling Terai: 1919–1925*. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot.
- Mitra, Sevti and Suprova Ray. 1985. "Changing Occupational Structure in Darjeeling Hills." *Geographical Review of India* 47(2):61–7.
- Namgyal, Hope. 1966. "The Sikkimese Theory of Landholding and the Darjeeling Grant." *Bulletin of Tibetology* 3(2):46–58.
- Nanda, Subrata K. 1987. "Gorkhaland: Quest for Identity." *Mainstream* 26(9):30–1.
- O'Malley, L. S. S. 1999 (1907). *Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling*. New Delhi: Logos Press.
- Paul, Chaya Rani. 1986. "Population and agricultural land-use in the hill areas of Darjeeling." *Himalaya: Man and Nature*. 9(12):12–6.

THE LAND QUESTION AND ETHNICITY IN THE DARJEELING HILLS 121

- Pearson, J. T. 1839. "A Note on Darjeeling." *Bound newspaper article*. Reprinted in Fred Pinn, *The Road to Destiny: Darjeeling Letters 1839*. Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Peet, Richard. 1978. "Materialism, Social Formation and Socio-Spatial Relations: An Essay in Marxist Geography." *Cahiers de géographie du Québec* 22(56):147–57. Retrieved January 1, 2010 (<http://www.erudit.org/documentation/eruditePolitiqueUtilisation.pdf>).
- Philpot, H. C. V. 1925. *Final Report on the Survey and the Settlement of Kalimpong Government Estate: 1919-1922*. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot.
- Sanyal, Kalyan. 2007. *Rethinking Capitalist Development: Primitive Accumulation, Governmentality and Post-Colonial Capitalism*. New Delhi: Routledge.
- Sarkar, N. K. 1988. "Class Conflicts in Darjeeling." *Mainstream* 26(23):11–14, 18.
- Sen, Jyotirmay. 1986. "Dudhia, A Newly Settled Village in Darjeeling Hills." *Geographical Review of India* 48(1):59–63.
- Srinivas, M. N. 2001. *Village, Caste, Gender and Method: Essays in Indian Social Anthropology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Srinivas, M. N. and André Béteille. 1964. "Networks in Indian Social Structure." *Man* 64:165–8.
- Subba, Tanka Bahadur. 1985. *The Quiet Hills: A Study of Agrarian Relations in Hill Darjeeling*. Delhi: ISPCK.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1986. "Agrarian Relations and Development in Sikkim." *Paper presented in National Seminar on Rural Development in Eastern and North Eastern India*, 8–10 May, Kolkata: IIM Joka Campus.
- Timsina, Suman Raj. 1992. *Nepali Community in India*. Delhi: Manak Publications.
- WBLRA (West Bengal Land Reforms Act). 1955a (2005). Section 14M. Kolkata: Kamal Law House.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1955b (2005). Section 14 Y. Kolkata: Kamal Law House.